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Zimbabwe's Ruling Party Seeks Support in Hostile Matabeleland

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TSHOLOTSHO, Zimbabwe—On the walls of the shops in this small sawmill town, the only political posters extol the virtues of Prime Minister Robert Mugabe's ruling party. Camped nearby are members of the 5th Brigade, Mugabe's notorious counterinsurgency unit, who patrol the area looking for armed "dissidents." The dusty, unpaved main street is virtually deserted, the mood is tense and fearful.

This is Tsholotsho, a frontier outpost on the western edge of Zimbabwe's Matabeleland and a traditional stronghold of Mugabe's chief political rival, opposition leader Joshua Nkomo. For the past 2½ years it has been a battleground.

In the government's harsh campaign against its foes, it is one of the places where supporters of Mugabe's Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) say they hope to make inroads in Monday's and Tuesday's national election for black voters, the first since the country gained independence five years ago. Whites elected 20 members of the 100-seat Parliament last week.

But many people in Tsholotsho seem to have other ideas. While they say they are so frightened that few will speak openly or allow their names to be used, many plan to support Nkomo despite the possible consequences.

"We have been told that if we don't vote for ZANU, we will be killed," said Angeline Mahlangu, a farmer who lives a few miles from town. "But we will vote for ZAPU [Nkomo's Zimbabwe African People's Union] because always it was our party."

Throughout Matabeleland, it is the consensus of missionaries, development workers and politicians

that voters will ignore the government's entreaties, defy the trend in the rest of Zimbabwe, where Mugabe is heavily favored, and support Nkomo.

Part of the reason is tradition: Nkomo, 67, is the patriarch and ethnic leader of these Ndebele speakers, who comprise about 18 percent of Zimbabwe's population. Part is the politics of anger: a vote for Nkomo is the only means for most people here to protest the treatment they have received at the hands of the government and the Army since 1982.

In the rest of Zimbabwe the government is conducting a reelection campaign, but here it has been waging a war. The ostensible targets are the "dissidents," most of whom are said to be Nkomo supporters who deserted the Army in 1982 after Mugabe charged their leader with caching arms and ousted him from his Cabinet post. Soon afterward, they began appearing in this area, killing officials of Mugabe's party and white farmers and destroying government property. The government says 26 of its supporters have been killed during the first six months of this year.

Nkomo has repeatedly denounced the dissidents, but that has not stopped the government from insisting that Nkomo and his followers are in league with them. Thus the government's equation here is brutally simple: those who support Nkomo also support dissidents.

Dozens and possibly hundreds of civilians died here in 1983 during the 5th Brigade's first crackdown, most of them killed by soldiers, according to missionaries, aid workers and western diplomats. Officials countered that most were killed either in cross fire or by dissidents disguised as soldiers, and Mugabe set up a commission of inquiry in

September 1983 to investigate allegations of atrocities. It has never made its findings public.

Early this year, unidentified men in unmarked white Land Rovers came through this area at night and abducted several dozen men said to be Nkomo loyalists.

No one knows for certain who took them or what their fate was, but human rights advocates have established in two dozen similar cases that the perpetrators were agents of the Central Intelligence Organization, the highly secret security force operating under the prime minister's office. The government has denied such allegations.

Men came for Angeline Mahlangu's husband, Josiah, on a moonlit night in early February, she recalled.

She has not seen him since, and she has been left alone to raise their seven children and to harvest sorghum and squash from the unyielding, hardscrabble field near her mud hut.

The Rev. Hebron Wilson, a priest in the southern city of Bulawayo who represents the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission here, a church-sponsored human rights group, said a witness saw three more men taken by soldiers in a

green jeep last Sunday from the same area. When he took his evidence to Army and Central Intelligence Organization officials in Bulawayo to try to locate the men, Wilson said, he was told it was none of his business.

Four white farms were burned near the southern town of Kezi three weeks ago and officials thereafter announced a new counterinsurgency crackdown to ensure that

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the people of Matabeleland are not "deprived of their right to elect a government of their choice."

But Wilson and other Justice and Peace officials said they fear the heavy military presence will only add to the atmosphere of intimidation in the region as voters go to the polls.

Mugabe's party controls 58 of the 80 parliamentary seats reserved for blacks, and his supporters are confident they will make further gains in the election. But they also say it is important for Mugabe to break Nkomo's near-monopoly in Matabeleland and for the prime minister—a member of Zimbabwe's Shona-speaking majority—to demonstrate conclusively he is a national leader with support among the Ndebele. Nkomo's party currently controls all but two of the 16 seats for this region.

To underline the region's importance to him, Mugabe launched his national reelection campaign here three weeks ago, drawing middle-sized but less than enthusiastic crowds in the towns of Plumtree, Gwanda and Beitbridge, all of which have been scenes of political unrest in recent months, and in Bulawayo. The prime minister alternately dispensed promises and threats to his audiences. He warned that a vote

for Nkomo's party would invite further bloodshed in the region.

"Where will we be tomorrow?" Mugabe asked the rally in Bulawayo. "Is it war or is it peace tomorrow? Let the people of Matabeleland answer this question."

Officials of the ruling party talk publicly of winning at least five of the region's 15 seats—one has been eliminated by redistricting—but privately they concede that the number could be far less. Among those facing possible defeat are two Ndebele Cabinet members for whom Mugabe personally campaigned but whom many here consider turncoats.

"It's tribalism," said a campaign official of Mugabe's party in Bulawayo. "Ndebeles do not want Robert Mugabe, a Shona, to be ruling over them."

The government has used and, at times, abused the powers of incumbency here. Development workers in Bulawayo say a truckload of drought relief food paid for with U.S. aid funds was diverted by the ZANU candidate in the northwestern town of Binga, and some of it was used to feed the crowd attending a recent Mugabe rally there.

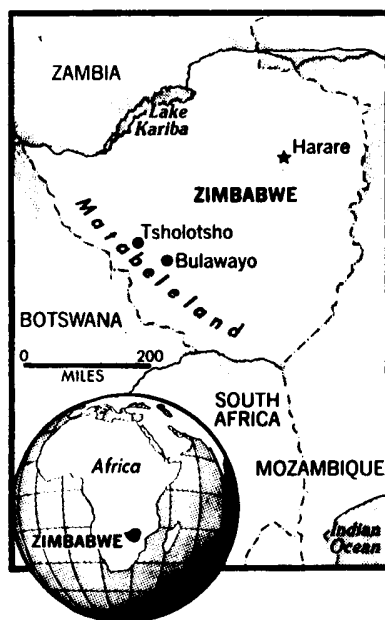
Adults were rounded up from Tsholotsho by soldiers and ruling party youth brigade members and

ordered to board buses to attend a Mugabe rally in the nearby town of Hwange earlier this month, according to residents. Joseph Msika, national vice president of Nkomo's party, said three ZAPU meetings in the same area were broken up by the Army.

"People are very angry," said Msika. "If they [ZANU leaders] think they can get people to vote for them by beating them, they will be surprised. All they are doing is instilling hate."

When asked about such allegations, officials of Mugabe's party counter with stories about the harassment their candidates have suffered at the hands of Nkomo supporters.

Andrew Ncube, a beer shop owner in Inkayi, a northern Matabeleland village, summed up the fear and determination expressed by many here. Ncube, a lifelong Nkomo supporter, said he had been shot at his store and fled to Bulawayo earlier this month after being threatened with death at his home by unidentified men. Nonetheless, he said, he plans to return to Inkayi on Monday to vote for ZAPU. "I'll go back, cast my vote and look over the situation," he said. "I've got to vote for my party."



BY RICHARD FURNO—THE WASHINGTON POST